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Environmentalism, Postmaterialism,
and Anxiety

The New Politics of Individualism

PAOLO DONATI

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**Environmentalism, Postmaterialism,
and Anxiety:
The New Politics of Individualism**

PAOLO DONATI

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Environmentalism, Postmaterialism, and Anxiety: The New Politics of Individualism

Summary

The new social movements, and environmentalism among them, were explained as forms of "new politics", rising from the spread of postmaterialist values and lifestyles among the new middle classes. Yet, an analysis of empirical data and findings shows that Postmaterialism and the "new politics" hardly explain the whole of environmentalism. Bursts of local grass-roots mobilization, coupled with defensive attitudes represent a sort of forgotten face of it, coming close to, and sometimes intertwining with, the new wave of populist protest. Can these two faces of environmentalism be explained by common phenomena of structural and cultural transformation? This essay argues that they can be explained by the transformation of the grammar of life-forms that has been described by post modernist theory. It is argued that it is precisely consumption, and the social dynamics it gives rise to, that can explain the two sides of environmentalism. While the post-materialist side represents the progressive approach of a new individualized consumerist politics, the populist side can be seen as the defensive attitude arising from declassification and the destruction of meaning and of community forms. Together, these two sides come to constitute a major challenge to current political institutions which is not that which focuses on environmental problems, but that which develops around the constitution of social forms as a collective good (and which is represented metaphorically by environmental problems).

1. Environmentalism, postmaterialist values and the New Middle Class

Modern environmentalism started to become visible at the end of the 1960s. The actors that have carried it into the political arena - the environmentalist movement and the various sorts of "green party" - have been recognised as a central component of the so-called "New Politics". The term "New Politics" is used to refer "to the growing importance of a new set of political goals" (Poguntke 1993: 10) and to a broad new challenge to the functioning of Western political institutions, coming from non-institutional actors.

The challenge comes from individuals and new social groups demanding that democracies open the political process to a more

diverse and citizen-oriented set of interests (Dalton, Kuechler and Buerklin 1990:3)

Besides the environment, pollution and nuclear energy, its priorities have been those of peace, human and women's rights.

Most students have seen the "New Politics" phenomenon as having its roots in the students' movement and in the alternative political culture of the New Left (Touraine 1980; Melucci 1984; Kitschelt 1985; Dalton 1988; Jamison *et al.* 1990; Mueller-Rommel 1990; Dalton, Kuechler and Buerklin 1990). On the one side, these students have pointed out the difference between the New Politics' actors and the traditional Left in terms of ideology and goals, and of participants' class location, as well as political experience. The New Politics is said to be different from the "Old" Politics with its "preoccupation with economic growth, stable prices, a stable economy, strong military defence and conventional political style" (Poguntke 1993: 10) as well as its concern with material wealth and its distribution among the social classes (Inglehart 1977; 1990b; Dalton 1988; Dalton and Kuechler 1990). Modern environmentalism is said to question the emphasis on wealth, material well-being and consumption as derivatives of the idea of technology as a measure of human civilization (Dunlap and van Liere 1978; Melucci 1984; Milbrath, 1984). Its concerns are "the concerns that a post-industrial society might emphasize" (Baker *et al.* 1981:141). Of course, it is new class strata which excludes the working class, while including broad segments of the middle classes and some marginal "non-professional" strata like students and housewives (Cotgrove and Duff 1980; Melucci 1984; Offe 1985a), and a new breed of movement activists (Diani 1995) that are the carriers of these struggles.

On the other side, however, the same students have seen the anti-establishment and anti-industrial attitudes as still clearly associated to a democratic-libertarian culture. The New Politics is seen as challenging the traditional working class Left mostly because of its institutionalized politics and its acceptance of techno-bureaucratic rationalization. Despite this, New Politics

parties like the green parties are seen as struggling in favour of direct participation and the openness of political institutions, stressing the key of individual self-realization and self-determination (Poguntke 1989). In short, the New Politics, and the environmentalist movement alike, have been broadly seen as rooted in a struggle in favour of progressive values and of a more democratic society. They are seen as a heritage of the "Left-libertarian tradition" (Kitschelt 1985): as attempts at opening new spaces for civil society's political democratic participation by freeing politics from the professionalization of incumbent politicians and established bureaucratic institutions (Jamison *et al.* 1990:192).¹

Perhaps the most influential explanation of the New Politics, as Dalton, Kuechler and Buerklin (1990) say, is that which comes from of Inglehart's work (Inglehart 1977; 1990a). According to Inglehart, in Western countries the long post-war period of peace and economic growth allowed the satisfaction of basic material and security needs among larger and larger strata of the population. The experience of increased material well-being produced, in younger cohorts who had not lived through the hardship of war, "An intergenerational shift from material to postmaterial values" (Inglehart 1990a:103). These cohorts are said to value participation, self-actualization, and aesthetical needs, and to abandon material wealth as the highest priority.² Postmaterialism is then linked to a

¹ In terms of political coalitions, while it is true that the new environmentalism has proved difficult to absorb by the traditional left, it is also true that individual participants' and green groups and parties' have often shown a clear preference for the leftist side of the political spectrum. In several cases (eg., in France, in German *Landers*, in Italian local governments) green parties have joined coalitions with traditional left (socialist or socialdemocratic) parties. Moreover, several analyses (Inglehart 1990b; Rohrschneider 1991) have shown environmentalist participants' identification with the leftist side or with issues that lie within the leftist tradition (if only, as Inglehart says, because the Left "constitutes the side of the political spectrum that is seeking social change"; 1990b:46). This identification however is also variable across countries (Mueller-Rommel 1990; Rohrschneider 1991).

² Inglehart says: "it is not that the postmaterialists reject the fruits of prosperity - but simply that their value priorities are less strongly dominated by the imperatives that were central to early industrial society." (1990b:45)

decline of economic and class-based issues, and to an increased salience of life-style issues, which are "transversal" to "old" class-based cleavages.

A second - but less popular - explanation has been formulated especially by New Social Movements (NSM) theorists (Touraine 1980; Brand 1982; Melucci 1984; Offe 1985a). Drawing on the theorists of the "post-industrial society", and of the rise of the new "professional-managerial class" (Touraine 1969; Bell 1973; Gouldner 1979; Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979), European NSM theorists stress the finding that "New Movements" activists and participants are especially likely to be drawn from new professional strata typical of the post-industrial stage, and endowed with a high level of education and intellectual skills: A "New Middle Class" or "human capital class" (Melucci 1989) composed of individuals who, although not in the power position of the American "New Class", are active as professionals in the field of cultural reproduction or in the expanding public and service sectors (teachers, civil servants, medical personnel, etc.; Melucci 1984; Offe 1985a). Because of their education, professional socialization and lifestyle, NMC members are assumed to be interested in decentralization, participation, political openness and a general democratization of social and political life.

In its implications, the NMC model overlaps substantially with that of the "culture shift", and lends support to the view of the New Politics as based on a quest for openness, participation, responsiveness, and democratization through new issues that are ill-aligned to traditional party cleavages.

2. Environmentalism as a quest for democracy?

It is my contention that the left-libertarian, democratising component of modern environmentalism (as well as of the New Politics) has received an almost exclusive focus, and that this has brought to a misinterpretation of the social and

political meaning (as well as political consequences) of the rise of these phenomena.

In the first place, convincing as they may be, current models seem to offer only a partial explanation for the new environmentalism. They point to social and cultural transformations, but there is nothing that links the content of environmental demands to the structural nature of the above transformations. The main shortcoming of these analyses is that they are based on individual-level factors, such as the level of education, the experience of security, etc. "Structural" factors are considered only as socio-demographics (eg., the rise of white collars), overlooking the mechanisms through which social structure reproduces itself.

More specifically, because of the way Inglehart's definition of "Postmaterialism" is constructed,³ his analysis, and the others which refer to it (Cotgrove and Duff 1980; 1981; Savage 1985; Mueller-Rommel 1990; Rohrschneider 1990; 1991), emphasize the fact that "Postmaterialism" is linked with the involvement in movement mobilization, as well as with the quest for direct participation and political openness. But the models fail to deal with the question of the novelties in the substantive content of the postmaterialist demands.⁴ As such, this "Postmaterialism" may just tap a phenomenon where

³ See Kuechler and Dalton (1990) for a criticism in this direction. The "postmaterialist" items are "Give people more say in important political decisions", and "Protect freedom of speech and thought". They are counterposed to "materialist" items: "Maintain order in the country", and "Fight rising prices". Of course, besides the specific limits of the model, here one should also point to the problem of how the relationship between values, action and social structure is examined through survey-based attitude studies. Unfortunately, there is no room for dealing with this topic here.

⁴ Inglehart's original model (Inglehart 1977) is also partially flawed in that its definition of postmaterialism emphasizes the positive correlation between a low priority for economic well-being and new attitudes and styles of political participation, but it quickly dismisses the fact that the same low priority for economic well-being is also associated to an orthogonal factor which includes both the desire for "more beautiful cities and countryside" (this item was added in 1973 to the survey questionnaire, and it was meant to tap "aesthetic" needs; see Inglehart 1977:45) and personal safety needs. In fact, the item on "more beautiful cities and countryside", turns out: a) to be important only in relatively advanced countries, but at the same time b) to be positively correlated with high priority for "Fight against crime", "A less

new (elite) groups demand wider representation for *their own* demands and the right to have "political say" within the polity. To take them as indicators of a general rise of qualitatively new values might mean mistaking the ideology through which new elite groups try to advocate access to political decision-making from which they were previously excluded, for a wider social trend that is indeed not there.

In the NMC-based version, the best and most carefully drawn models in considering structural factors - as I shall say later on - are perhaps those of Touraine (1969) and Melucci (1984; 1989). But besides the many doubts that the conflict between the "technocratic planners" and the disempowered "new intellectuals" is a really central one (Lyon 1986), most of the other works take the existence of this conflict in a somewhat anecdotal fashion. They are not clear on whether the new demands express concerns derived from a substantive transformation in the reproductive structure of the social system, or whether they are, again, simply previously unrepresented ones asking for access to the polity. Often, the NMC's supposed interest in more democracy is just derived from surveys of attitudes rather than from structural analyses, thus making a rather weak case for "Postmaterialism", especially since the NMC appears to be just another elite segment, and its actual size does not in itself make it into a major socio-structural change.

In short, these models indicate above all the need for modernization of Western political systems face to the rise of new social and economic groupings (see eg., Kaase 1990) with new economic and political preferences. Yet, the structural nature of the changes and of the new cleavages, and the way they

impersonal, more humane society", and "A society where ideas count more than money", and negatively correlated with high priority for economic stability and political activism (Inglehart 1977:45-50). What seems to emerge from this analysis, then, is that "postmaterialism" is an ambiguous phenomenon which, while it definitely taps a disregard for economic well-being, it also includes some "prematerialist", nostalgic desire for safer and less conflictual social relations. Unfortunately, Inglehart only briefly comments on this.

relate to the new political issues is hardly examined.⁵ Because of this, potentially relevant conclusions concerning the question of why *these* specific new demands (including mainly environmental ones) emerge are missed, and the emphasis is instead placed on the aspects related to political democratization.

In most analyses, the relationship between the structural position of the conflicting social groups, their "cultures", the demands that are advanced, and the forms of political action, is left unanalysed. The question is especially important for the environmental challenge, as it is normally held to represent the core of the "new politics", of the NSM, and of the postmaterialist quest. The relationship between the social-structural (and between the cultural-structural) level and the content of the new political demands is not really examined. For example, while it is plausible that increased education and security may produce demands that are less directly related to sheer economic well-being, the sense in which the new demands are "post materialistic" and concern the "quality of life" is never made too clear,⁶ as well as what these definitions mean at the structural level of social reproduction. Moreover, it is not clear why these demands should

⁵ For example, Dalton, Kuechler and Buerklin (1990:10-16) examine the main differences between the New and the Old movements in ideology and goals, the motivations to participate, the organizational structure of the new political groups, political style: all points that relate to the realm of political action. The aspects related to the base of support is only shortly touched in a half page. On the other side, the socio-structural hypothesis was since the beginning quite difficult to substantiate through survey data: few survey data can relate the support for the environment to socio-structural factors, and evidence generally fail to support a "social class" hypothesis as based on income and occupational prestige, while only the education aspect turns out to be broadly associated with environmental concern. Besides this, only age, ideology and urban residence, are related to environmental concern (Van Liere and Dunlap 1980). Besides these difficulties, no explanation has been given of the only certain structural finding available, namely that working class people are not inclined to have postmaterialist values and to engage in "new politics" phenomena. The only explanation has been that working class people were already represented by traditional leftist and socialist parties. But this, again, does not answer the question of what is qualitatively new in the "postmaterialist" demands.

⁶ For example, in what sense is peace a life-style issue rather than one of personal security, or why do these demands include environmental care but not the possibility of travelling faster, or even issues of health and safety at the workplace (would the latter still be "material" issues)?

include political openness, participation, democratization as a substantive value, and not just as a mere by-product of the fact of demanding access.

The New left roots of environmentalism have been seen precisely as consisting of demands for political modernization and democratization. But precisely because the link between environmentalism and political values has not been analysed carefully, attributing the rise of the greens to a Left-libertarian wave may mean overlooking some of the socio-structural transformations, as well as some of the empirical political phenomena, that have contributed to the political impact of the issue.

3. A restatement based on available evidence

In fact, there are first of all empirical evidences that there is more than postmaterialist cohorts and NMC segments underlying the political impact of modern environmentalism.

Eurobarometer surveys have been used to support the postmaterialist hypothesis but they have also tried to measure the concern of Western populations for environmental problems. And, these data have shown how, during the whole 1980s, the proportion of those declaring that environmental problems are "important" or "very important" has never dropped below 90% in any of the Western European countries, and has tended to rise across the decade (Hofrichter and Reif 1990). When the above data are matched to data about the diffusion of postmaterialist values, however, it is almost immediately obvious that, as reported by Inglehart (1990:93, table 2.4), in 1987 the proportion of the population holding postmaterialist values averaged 15% across the same EU countries (16% in the US) - with countries raging from 25% (Netherlands) to 6% (Portugal) - thus standing at a level way below that of general environmental concern.

The two set of figures are actually so distant that one may well wonder whether they tap different phenomena. In front of them, one may start to wonder who are the post materialists whose presence should explain the rise of the new movements, and what has their role been. A first answer is Inglehart's finding that Postmaterialism is correlated with "membership or potential membership" in the ecology movement (Inglehart 1990b:53-56), but much less so with the more general category of "strong approval" (notice, not "indifference", or "opposition"!) of the movement itself. In fact, the proportion of those falling in the "member/potential member" category for the environmentalist movement according to Inglehart ranges (1986 data) from 8% (Belgium) to 50% (Greece), thus coming closer to the level of diffusion of postmaterialist values.

Few studies, however, have compared actual participants or activist, with people who more broadly "support" the movement or its cause. Two of these have been conducted by Kriesi (Kriesi 1989a; 1989b) who found that as one proceeds from non-supporters, to sympathisers, to potential participants, to participants and to activists in the environmental movement (in Holland), the proportion holding postmaterialist values in each subgroup increases progressively from 6 to about 40%, *with the main gap occurring between "sympathisers" and "potential participants"*. And again, while the global proportion of those who define themselves as "activists" or "potential activists" in the environmentalist movement is close to the proportion of postmaterialist among the population, once the "supporters" are included one reaches percentages of 80-90%, which are closer therefore to the proportion of people who think the environment is an "important" or "very important" problem" (Rohrschneider 1991).

These data may indicate a split between actual members of environmentalist groups and the generally sympathetic population. The environmental phenomenon may thus be comprised of a group of post materialists more likely to participate actively in the movement, and of a (larger) group of people being

instead more generally "concerned" about environmental decay and broadly "supporting" the movement's goals. A confirmation comes from a recent and still preliminary set of research findings by Witherspoon (Witherspoon 1994). Her study found "environmental pessimism", "romanticism", and "concern" to be positively correlated among themselves, but not with environmental (and scientific) knowledge. At the same time, however, the politically active green activists turned out to possess a higher level of scientific knowledge, to be less "romantic" about nature and a little less "pessimistic" about the environment.

The presence of more than one component behind the environmental phenomenon emerges also when one looks at patterns of active participation in environmental struggles. Since environmentalism first broke out in Europe with the anti-nuclear struggles, politically active participation on these issues was by no means limited to activism in the more or less official movement organizations. In Italy the anti-nuclear campaigns encompassed a strong grass-roots component from which they actually derived their main strength. This component was based on the mobilization of citizens living close to the sites where the nuclear plants had to be built. Protest demonstrations were mostly local ones, even if a degree of central coordination by movement organizations and activists let them achieve a unity of timing and effect, and allowed political demands to be translated at the central national level. In Germany, according to Mueller-Rommel, "Most of these movements emerged spontaneously on the local level as politically independent citizen-initiative groups. These groups were interested in single issues such as the provision of parks; they protested against urban renewal, new highways, or the construction of nuclear power plants." (1989:5; see also Mueller-Rommel 1985; Diani 1990; Scharf 1994). The same can be said of local environmental struggles in Britain, where a national movement cannot be said to exist (Lowe and Goyder 1983; Diani 1995), and in the US, where local citizen mobilizations against toxic waste facilities, for example, have become a major political phenomenon, although they remain clearly distinct from the traditional

conservation organizations (Masterson-Allen and Brown 1990; Perrolle 1993; Walsh, Warland and Smith 1993). In sum, a strong emphasis on local mobilizations has been a distinctive feature of contemporary ecology action almost everywhere the Green movement has been most successful at becoming a major national political actor. During the whole 1980s environmental mobilizations remained largely based on local and regional cases; the importance of these phenomena of local grass-roots resistance by no means being limited to the initial phase (Diani 1995).

The new environmental challenge, thus, encompasses a properly said environmentalist movement as well as the above forms of citizen resistance: "A constant feature of environmental mobilizations in Western countries has been the interaction between actors with moderate political orientations - often dwellers in areas confronting growing environmental risks... - and actors with more radical, anti-establishment attitudes - often formerly socialized to politics within post-1968 protest movements" (Diani 1995:ch.1). Yet, although important in building political pressure and in making the issue more salient, these grass-roots mobilizations (and their participants as well) have constituted a quite different aspect of environmentalism from the action of the main organizations "officially" representing the movement (Donati 1994). First, the activation and mobilization of citizens owed little to the major environmentalist organizations that are normally seen as constituting the movement. Second, most of these conflicts, and the grass-roots groups supporting them, remained very short-lived. Third, in many cases the mobilizers would disclaim the "patronage" of the main environmentalist associations, or they would refuse to recognise a leadership role to movement activists.

Most of the participants in these local grass-roots mobilizations are likely to be quite different from those who define themselves as "members" of the environmentalist movement or of the main environmentalist associations. Although they are almost certainly sympathetic to the environmental cause, and

although they are concerned about environmental degradation, participants in local NIMBYs, resistance, or "technology" mobilizations are not likely to be defined - or even to define themselves - as environmentalist activists or even participants. Sheer economic motives and motives of personal security do not loom very far behind these actions: the fear for personal health due to chemical hazards is one aspect, but even more important is the preoccupation with the loss of value of estate assets, be they discovered to lie on a Superfund site, or just devalued by the nearby noise and pollution generated by a planned motorway, airport runaway, or landfill. Indeed, these people seem to have very little in common with Inglehart's young postmaterialist activists concerned with issues of democratization and self-realization. Citizens mobilising against local hazards or development plans share the anti-institutional positions of the environmentalist movement. But they tend to adopt rather defensive and particularistic justice frames stressing compensation rights, rather than a universalistic frame stressing world salvation (Edelstein 1988; Masterson-Allen and Brown 1990; Feagin and Capek 1991; Aronson 1993; Capek 1993; Kowalewski and Porter 1993).

In fact, if activists and participants in the NSMs and their organizations have been said to belong typically to the NMC (ie., journalists, teachers, semi-professionals and professionals in the medical services, social workers, journalists, etc.: Cotgrove and Duff 1980; see also Melucci 1984), when the analysis is broadened to the outer supporters and to the participants in local resistance mobilizations, other social strata tend to emerge, mainly belonging to the "old" middle class or the petite bourgeoisie. As Kriesi put it, the concept of NMC is at the same time too broad and too narrow here. Using data on the Netherlands he shows that not all members of the NMC actually participate or even support the NSM, but this support is restricted to the social and cultural specialists. At the same time (at least in the Netherlands), there seems to be a high degree of support of NSMs and the environmental demands among the petite bourgeoisie (Kriesi 1989a). These strata are not active in movement

activities but mobilize occasionally when directly concerned; they do not hold postmaterialist values, but still tend to frame some of their concerns as environmental concerns, and are therefore eager to declare that they feel worried by environmental problems, and that they "support" the goals of the environmentalist movement. Similarly, Diani finds that, even compared at the local level, the main difference between mobilizers in grass-roots neighbourhood groups and the members of city and regional branches of the environmental movement's organizations is one of education and occupation, with the former being significantly less likely to hold a university degree and a professional job. Consequently, only 15% among the former could be classified as members of the NMC, against 44% of the latter (Diani 1995). Concerning the US, finally

Unlike other contemporary movements (e.g., the women's movement, anti-nuclear groups) the movement against toxic waste is not composed primarily of highly educated or upper-middle-class people who are motivated by global concerns... [These local mobilizers]...are not highly educated, and are not young. Nor are they part of an alternative culture. (Masterson-Allen and Brown 1990:487-97)

Thus, these findings raise some questions about the role of different segments of the middle class in the environmental issue and in other "postmaterialist" issues, and point to the need for a different and broader view of the environmental challenge. Rather than the spread of postmaterialist values, or of a demand for democratization of political processes, some of the aspects connected to the concern for environmental degradation seem to stem from rather basic feelings of anxiety. They can be seen as

the reflex of subtly disquieting perceptions which... contribute to define a substantially pessimistic vision of social life. (Biorcio 1988a:31)

4. Modernization, rationalization and resistance

Early NSM theorists had recognised that environmental conflicts could be seen as the mobilization of a set of defensive concerns against technological modernization and rationalization. These analyses seem to be consistent with the idea that there is something like a "romantic-pessimistic" aspect of environmentalist protest. They might therefore provide the basis for an analysis of the environmental challenge as a result of specific structural processes, thus going beyond its interpretation as a simple phenomenon of conflict of interests or of political competition.

According to Habermas, for example, the new conflicts arise at the point of juncture between the rationality of the system and the culture of the "life-world" (Habermas 1981b). They are expressions of a retreatism ("They do not seek to conquer new territory"; Habermas 1981a:34) seeking to defend the values and traditions (the "grammar of forms of life") of civil society's enclaves (of the "periphery") against the "colonization" imposed by the "core" of the system: the pervasive process and profit-informed rationalization of the bureaucratic capitalist state and its apparatuses. Environmental struggles are seen as opposing the consumeristic redefinition of the life-world and of personal life styles (1981b). In a similar way, Alain Touraine (1978) sees the New Social Movements as a struggle between the technocratic apparatus and its "clients," defending the right to choose their own style of life. In his first works (Melucci 1977, 1980) Melucci also saw the origin of the NSM in the need of contemporary apparatuses to extend their forms of control beyond the structure of production and into the reproduction of social relationships, into the areas of consumption and social services. As control over the labour force is no longer enough, the capitalist state expands its control to civil society's organizational structures, the exchange of information, symbolic systems and interpersonal relationships. This is achieved thanks to the role of science, and to the resulting

ability of central apparatuses to intervene on society and social life. Face to the increasing pressure of this impersonal but pervasive power, social conflicts shift from the factory and the political system to new spheres where the NSM struggle for the reappropriation of their personal identities against the rationalising intervention of technostuctures. Castells (1983), finally, also argued that community-based mobilizations are triggered by the problem of the social control and manipulation of local space as a systematic feature of today's economic organization.

A number of works have recently echoed these views. Following Touraine, Luke claims that informational advancements and the internationalization of the economy displace material products and goods: choices and opinions are pre-manufactured and pre-framed, and made of "consumerist individualism, material progress, anti-communism, mutual defense, and liberal-democratic decision-making" (Luke 1989:136). The resistance to these transformations, while still ill-articulated, mixes up new and traditionalist characters, progressive and regressive populist overtones. Again, however, the lines of conflict are between "technocratically empowered planners/producers/providers and disempowered citizens/consumers/clients." (Luke, 1989:133) Luke sees a parallel between environmentalism and the tradition of community defense and populism (Luke 1991; see also Lasch 1991), against the domination of "New Class's" technocracy. Feagin and Capek (1991) have emphasized that: "Such movements... are a strategic historical response to a particular kind of powerlessness, a pragmatic strategy in a complex, bureaucratized, monopoly-capital context" (Feagin and Capek 1991:48-9).

A recent book by Jamison *et al.* (1990), using Habermas's category of "knowledge interest", has succeeded in penetrating some of the cultural-structural questions underlying the environmental quest. According to it, the "knowledge interests" which are specific of the new environmentalism find their core in the opposition to the alliance between science and industry, and to the

resulting technologization and bureaucratization of social life. The environmental issue is seen as a quest about the production and use of technical knowledge, both in social life and in political decision-making, and as one that "could only emerge at a time when the convergence between science and industry, as well as some unintended effects of industrialization, were becoming apparent." (Jamison *et al.* 1990:4). What is still missing from this analysis, however, is a structural examination of the logic - or "grammar" as Habermas says - of the social identities that underlie the environmental "knowledge interests". The question is how central are, and why, the values of equality, democracy, participation, to environmental issue's roots in the cultural criticism of technical rationality and bureaucracy; and whether there are other values that become more central for those strata who feel threatened by technology.

More in general, these analyses raise the question of the nature of the life-forms from which resistance originates. Habermas talks about the "grammar of life-forms", yet he never quite defines the basic articulation of such grammar besides speaking of "peripheral" forms of life as opposed to the system's "core". Other theorists basically claim that the new movements are "identity-centered" (see Luke 1989) but hardly say anything about the content of these identities. For both Touraine and Habermas it is the identity-centered character and the related anti-state focus that cause the political ambivalence of the NSM.

An empirical problem is that especially the Habermasian version ends up identifying the mobilising groups as marginal ones. But even if one considers resistance mobilizers at the local level, who are therefore not NMC members, there are strong doubts that these strata can be defined as "marginal" or "powerless". Furthermore, there is no mention of the problem of how petite-bourgeois life-forms (assuming that they are marginalized life-forms) can become allied with the progressive NMC struggling for openness and democratization. It is not made clear what would be the common ground

between the latter and the supposedly regressive, neo-communitarian instances of the "peripheral" groups.

5. Dissolving traditional ties and the process of individualization

A deeper analysis of structural and cultural factors connected to the above identities, and to the "life-forms" is therefore needed.

In my opinion, there is one aspect whose structural implications and consequences have not been analysed enough in depth. As Kriesi (1989a) reminds us, the dissolution of traditional ties also entails as a specular condition the increase of individual autonomy. In a long essay on the NSM in West Germany, Kitschelt follows in part the original Habermasian and Touraine analyses. Yet, his attempt to understand the NSM historically - that is, as movements that come after the great social conquests of the Old Left - brings him to look at the other side of the coin of the process of modernization and of its consequences for society's reproductive mechanisms. Kitschelt sees the NSM as "organized around the provision of intangible life chances" (1985:276). They seek autonomy from the state because: "The welfare state compromise is hostile to qualitative life chances." (Kitschelt 1985:277) Implicit in Kitschelt analysis is that the life chances are *individual life chances*. And indeed, he sees the conflict also as one between the imperatives of production and those of consumption, linked to the opposition between the sphere of production and the sphere of reproduction.

But perhaps the two authors who have analysed the process of individualization in its relationship to the rise of the NSM and the environmental struggles are Melucci and Beck. Melucci does not stress the separation between the neo-communitarian component and the NMC component. Rather, especially in his later works (eg., Melucci 1989) he sees the structural determinant of both types of conflicts in the process of "individualization" of postindustrial life. The

logic of individualization empowers the individual as a self-reflexive actor, but also forces state and bureaucratic apparatuses to extend their control - using the same self-reflexivity - to the symbolic sphere and into the territory of individual life. The logic of individualization, therefore, is the logic of both life chances and the defense of one's own identity.

Ulrich Beck has also pointed to the logic of individualization as determining new patterns of conflict. His work clarifies some of the systemic origins of individualization.

In the welfare state of the West, reflexive modernization dissolves the traditional parameters of industrial society: class culture and consciousness, gender and family roles. It dissolves these forms of the conscience collective, on which depend and to which refer the social and political organizations and institutions in industrial society. These detraditionalizations happen in a *social surge of individualization*... The tendency is towards the emergence of individualized forms and conditions of existence, which compel people... to make themselves the center of their own planning and conduct of life... we increasingly confront the phenomenon of a capitalism *without* classes, but with individualized social inequality and all the related social and political problems. (Beck 1992a:87-8)

Beck's model is similar to that of Melucci. The idea is that there is, first, an increase in the resources that are available to the individual as resources for individual action and choice, and second, an increasing disposition of individuals to perceive themselves as individuals (reflexivity). At the origin of the process stands the disappearance of traditional social and community ties, coupled with the universalization of the labour market and of the educational process, and with the rising standards of living.

Melucci and Beck work can help defining the structural determinants of the NSM and the environmental conflict, although the two authors tend to draw two rather different conclusions. Melucci (1989) argues that the "new" movements will no longer be concerned with the redistribution of material resources, but

rather with the production of meaning which presides to the "administrative logic" of the system. The system is challenged on the "codes" of domination, and the first groups to mobilize will be those who are directly touched by the production of meaning. According to Beck, the distribution of risks in contemporary societies breaks the patterns of class and pits citizens against the very institutions (science above all) that are supposed to be in charge of risk prevention.⁷ A "commonality of anxiety" (instead of a commonality of need) emerges together with "solidarity from anxiety". This gives rise to conflicts where people are touched in their property, health, chances of work achievement. These conflicts are "oriented to the grass-roots, non-parliamentary, not tied to any particular class or party, and programmatically diffuse or even fragmented." (Beck 1992b:117)

The two pictures, once again, seem to evoke the dualism between the core of the NSM and the local citizens' mobilizations. Yet, when taken together in their common emphasis of individualization as the central mechanism that spurs new controversies, they seem to provide a useful conceptualization for the identity forms that a number of central strata in Western societies are trying to articulate through new controversies (the NSM) such as the environmental one.

Thus, if Habermas identified the new social movements as focusing over the "grammar of forms of life", but used the term in a generic way, Melucci - whose concept of "codes" (dominant vs. alternative: Melucci 1984, 1989) is akin to that of "grammar" - provides a useful hypothesis about the specific grammar from which the challenge arises: It is the grammar of individualization that stands at the origin both of the progressive struggle over the life chances animated by the NMC, and of the struggles for the defense of life-forms from rationalization. The claim, however, still needs a proper structural foundation explaining how the process may work.

⁷ Giddens has also written on this, and he cites Melucci when he speaks of the NSM (see Giddens 1990:ch.5).

6. The middle-class society

The historical process leading to the formation of the "social state" is said to be linked to the diffusion of a "grammar" of life-forms based on individualization (Kitschelt 1985). The process in which civil, political and social rights become universally recognised and institutionalized is a process that ultimately formalizes the individual as the legitimate center of society (Melucci 1989). It is somewhat ironical, therefore, that while it is aimed at improving life-chances for increasingly larger strata this process (which is also inscribed within the social-democratic project of the modern organized working class; see Sulkunen 1992) ends up defeating this same purpose.

The process is first of all a process of formation of new middle-class strata, and it is due to several parallel social and political transformations that take place slightly before the development of environmental protests and of the NSM. The social state represents a primary factor in the development of an "intermediate" service class (Esping-Andersen 1993), as well as a powerful interference in the reproduction of the traditional classes through the competitive labour market (Offe 1985b), as it creates groups of workers whose (class) position is unrelated to the strict capitalistic process. This is part of the attempt to "defuse" the "revolutionary bomb" of industrial conflict (Dahrendorf 1959) by providing universal citizenship rights and by creating new "intermediate" interests between the proletarian class and the bourgeoisie. Other related transformations are represented by an increase in social mobility (even if confined to adjacent class positions); a general decrease of the differences in income and working conditions between the working-class and the middle-class

strata (due also to the successful struggles of organized labour);⁸ a progressive growth in the global average income of families; a rise in general education levels (Sylos-Labini 1986). These processes are related to a number of more specific transformations in the organization of work and of social reproduction. The main ones are: the enormous growth of the number of people employed in circulation and distribution, management, administration, due to the increased complexity of knowledge, and consequently of management and steering needs,⁹ compared to the needs of physical production (Bell 1973); a general "reorganization of capitalism", itself related to the decline of employment in industrial (and agricultural) production that makes available human resources for new tasks;¹⁰ the growth of the sphere of reproduction (medicine, social work, education, etc.), of personal services and of the culture industry, all with their middle-class professionals and small entrepreneurs, in turn made possible by the increased well-being of families and individual consumers; the welfare-state's white-collar employees and administrators, that may be seen as related both to the need to tame the class conflict, and to the need to absorb unemployment (Offe 1985b; Sylos-Labini 1986).

The result of these changes has been the rise of a number of professional careers, categories, and groups that have filled-in industrial society's cleavage between the working class and the capitalist (and managerial) class (Sylos-Labini 1986; Esping-Andersen 1993). The importance of the working class itself, in numerical terms, has progressively decreased. The debate on the meaning of

⁸ Although some have argued for a reversed process, where the growth of education brought to an increased offer of intellectual work, thus causing its relative depreciation compared to manual work (Sylos-Labini 1986: 149).

⁹ Which includes the advent of the "managerial revolution", and of "technocracy" (Dahrendorf 1959; Galbraith 1967). For an original thesis, see Lash and Urry (1987).

¹⁰ This includes both the idea that there is an increased need for supervision due to the decline of other forms of social control, which brings about the "professional-managerial class" (Wright 1978; Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979; Abercrombie and Urry 1983); and the idea that capital needs to consume the accumulated surplus and to create a spending capacity that keeps the economy running, both of which are satisfied by the creation of new "non-productive" professions such as media- and sales-related ones (Baran and Sweezy 1966).

these transformations has raged for years in relation to the "proletarianization" thesis.¹¹ Yet, even Marxist students (eg., Offe 1985b; Lash and Urry 1987) have recently recognised that this trend has brought about an increasing fragmentation and complexity in occupational structure.

Post-industrial society seems to produce much less proletarianization than did its industrial predecessor... it appears that unskilled service workers' share may stabilize around a maximum of 10-15 percent of the labor force; this compares to roughly 20-25 percent unskilled industrial workers in 1960." (Esping-Andersen 1993:45)

It is possible to say, then, that Western societies are experiencing the disappearance of a well-defined structural cleavage in the productive relation, as if the new occupations, and the productive structure that is linked to it, tend to eliminate deeply polarized structures (Offe 1985b). Post-industrial society is less polarized and its cleavages "are numerically less substantial than their industrial forebears." (Esping-Andersen 1993:48) But this is also related to a decrease in the differences - in income, culture and life-style - among the various social groups in the lower- and middle-classes.

The middle class comes now to represent the largest part of the population, thus constituting a "thick" middle layer. Yet, precisely because this debate has brought students to focus on the aspects related to production on one side, and on the "objective" conditions of people's (and middle class strata's) lives (which has been true even for Weberian students), they have almost completely overlooked the cultural aspects related to the perception of social reality on the side of these same strata, and the consequences this may have on the formation of identities.

¹¹ On this debate see among others Mallet (1975); Wright (1978); Abercrombie and Urry (1983); Sylos-Labini (1986).

7. Individualization and consumption

Yet, there is one more question; that is, how do the new "intermediate" class positions translate into the new individualized identities and into the individualization of the "grammar of life-forms"? The answer is: Thanks to the growing centrality of consumption.

It is a common understanding that in the period between the end of the 1950s and the 1970s the Western world has reached the stage of *mass* consumption. Statistical figures indicate that in the period from 1960 to 1990, for example, the share of food in household expenditures went down from over one half to slightly more (sometimes less) than one quarter; at the same time, the ownership of cars and TV sets increased by a factor of five to ten.¹²

Today we stand at the climax of the society of consumption: the so-called "postmodernist" stage.¹³ Even more than on occupational structure, the parallel processes of fragmentation and de-differentiation may be said to have produced their effects at the level of culture and life-style. Processes of fragmentation and middle-classization are based on, and increase the, prospects for individual mobility across an increasingly homogenous social space and across a set of similar but different occupations and styles of life, access to which, moreover, compels the individual to compete with other individuals. In people's subjective experience, thus, the structure of stratification comes to resemble a thick stratum of "closely packed layers" (McKendrick *et al.* 1982). There is certainly more competition and an increased perception of the risks connected to the separation from traditional support networks, but also a sense of increased democracy, equality and freedom, where the subjects may experience "formerly exclusive

¹² See Therborn (1995) for an useful summary of these figures.

¹³ This seems to be true regardless of whether we assume, like Baudrillard (1974), Bell (1976) or Jameson (1984) that contemporary society has moved into a new stage in which consumption (and culture) play an unprecedented role, or if we assume that it is the culture of consumption that has acquired new prominence (Featherstone 1991).

types of consumption and styles of living" (Beck 1992a:95). Individuals are brought to experience an increased room for individualized choice and for individually chosen experiences and identities.

Consumption is not a postmodern phenomenon. Yet, the social sciences have paid very little attention to its development as an activity of social reproduction (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; McCracken 1990; Sassatelli 1995). Some conclusions, however, may be drawn from the work of social historians and anthropologists who have traced the vagaries of consumption and style since the eighteenth century (McKendrick *et al.* 1982; McCracken 1990). These works tend to stress one point which may turn out to be very important: namely, that the rise of consumerism and of a culture of consumption to the foreground of social life, is typically related to the expansion of middle-class strata.

McKendrick has shown (McKendrick *et al.* 1982) how the first expansion of consumption that took place in eighteenth-century England was pushed by a process of social equalization and by the rise of middle-class strata. These strata created newly expanding markets for goods, and came to constitute the motor of imitation and fashions. The preconditions for the boom were represented by rising wages for workers, a social structure characterised by a "narrowing social distance", and by high opportunities for social mobility. Documents of the period (around 1760 and 1780) talk of a "spirit of equality", "emulation", and "ambition" to raise oneself at the level of those in superior ranks, and of the idea that "society was an aggregation of self-interested individuals tied to one another by the tenuous bonds of envy, exploitation and competition." (McKendrick *et al.* 1982:18)

That consumption is used for status competition is a sort of truism. The accent here, however, is not on the phenomenon in itself, but rather on the existence of historical cycles that may represent structural patterns. If the social-structural characteristics that accompany periods of booming consumption remain consistently similar across different historical periods, it may perhaps be

hypothesised that the individual freedom deriving from the fall of more traditional boundaries increases competition for status among individuals and groups (Beck 1992a). All ages of breakdown of traditional social structures and systems of stratification, in which individuals are freed from social ties, are therefore phases in which consumption activities become particularly intense.

Another important point is that consumption is not just a game of imitation. The attention to consumption styles, but even in the sphere of work the professionalization of careers through the multiplication of degrees, diplomas, professional groups, etc., are also part of a game of "distinction" (Bourdieu 1979), and this is a very central mechanism in the self-reproduction of consumption practices. Social groups lose their identities; they become open to choice (Melucci 1989), but also open to expropriation and symbolic occupation. In place of patterns of stratification determined by tradition, there is a continuous destitution and re-constitution of social boundaries. Strategies of symbolic "closure" (Parkin 1979) are used to establish differences both in the sphere of consumption (eg., imitation and "exclusivity" in styles) and within the labour market (eg., formal boundaries among professions). Following Bourdieu one may say therefore that the middle classes are the classes whose "habitus" is characterized by the search for distinction, precisely because they are the classes that historically have felt the need to justify and symbolize an existence that otherwise would have been "lost in the middle". Middle-class society is a de-differentiated society in which the struggle for status achievement is continuous:

[The] social-structural position [of the new and old middle classes] makes their members perfect consumers, who have to fight for status on the diverse markets. (Eder 1993:146)

On the one side,

The forms of existence that arise are the isolated *mass market*... and *mass consumption* of generically designed housing, furnishing,

articles of daily use, as well as opinions, habits, attitudes and lifestyles launched and adopted through the mass media. (Beck 1992a:132)

On the other side it is precisely the mass standardization that multiplies the strategies of individualization based on symbolic closure. Where boundaries become thin and blurred, efforts to draw them are more intense (and they are likely to be more frustrating). This game of distinction - or of "building bridges and fences" (Douglas and Isherwood 1979) - therefore is strictly related to the development of the middle-classes, and represents the basis of individualized life-styles and of the "grammar" of individualization.

This does not mean that social relationships today have become symbolic, in contrast with their previous "materiality". Neither it means that the symbolic aspect of goods and behaviours was absent before. Class and status-group relationships have always had a symbolic content (that ultimately has to do with the legitimation of social structure itself). Today, however, the symbolic potential is unleashed by the processes that bring to individualization and to the erosion of traditional boundaries. In contrast to other historical periods of booming consumption, today the middle-classes have come to represent the largest part of the population in all advanced societies. As a consequence, the sphere of consumption, as opposed to that of production, becomes the central sphere for the reproduction of social structure and of society *qua* society.

Some have noticed that with the increase in material wealth, consumption patterns turn towards the intellectual, recreational and abstract. Inglehart's theory of Postmaterialism may be seen as a variant of this thesis. But this is not the point. The point is that every area of life (including arts, DiMaggio 1987; urban space, Zukin 1982; etc.) is absorbed in the consumption-for-style game. More

and more areas become part of markets and the goods and objects that belong to them become "consumable".¹⁴

There is the need, therefore, to abandon the perspective that sees social groups as carriers of "new" values, and to focus instead on social groups as "producers, transmitters and consumers of... culture." (Betz 1992:97) Such a perspective can show how, in a society that becomes "self-reflexive" (Melucci 1989; Giddens 1990; Beck 1992a) conflicts become increasingly centered, as Kitschelt (1985) says, on the structure of social reproduction. In fact, the grammar of individualization, by infusing the identities of individuals and social groups, becomes part of the structure of production and reproduction of society. The "new" conflicts, and the environmental challenge among them, are rooted in this "structural" process.

8. The politics of consumer society: Freedom, de-classification, and anxiety

Consumer choice is a central mechanism through which a "grammar" of individualization develops because it is the carrier of an experience of self-assertion and freedom. Through it, freedom becomes freedom of choice (for all: Bauman 1988). Critics in the Marxist tradition like Marcuse and the Frankfurt school have noticed this, but they have seen consumer freedom as simply another (superstructural) way for capitalism to dominate the masses (Bauman 1992). They have tended to see it under the perspective of "commodification" of culture and politics.¹⁵ Clearly, capitalism does have an interest in expanding

¹⁴ As to cultural goods: "changes in social structure and the rise of an open market for cultural goods have weakened institutionalized cultural authority, set off spirals of cultural inflation, and created more differentiated, less hierarchical, less universal, and less symbolically potent systems of cultural classification than those in place during the first part of this century." (DiMaggio 1991:134)

¹⁵ In this perspective, individualistic attitudes that hamper political action become proper of working class individuals who reach a certain level of income and who live in certain cultural milieu. See for example Goldthorpe *et al.* (1968-69), Edsforth (1987).

consumption (Jameson 1984), and it is important not to overlook this aspect. Nevertheless, the focus should be put here, as Featherstone says "on the question of the growing prominence of the *culture* of consumption and not merely regard consumption as derived unproblematically from production." (1991:13).

In this sense, the experience of freedom of choice is no doubt a correlate of the erosion of traditional norms, social ties and boundaries. But the growing importance of the sphere of consumption is not only an effect that stands for a phenomenon of equalization and democratization of living standards. It is also a phenomenon through which the individualized grammar of life-styles is given substance, reinforced, and ritually confirmed as a central normative pattern for all those who participate in it. Consumption, therefore, becomes one of the fundamental activities through which the social and normative structures are reproduced.

A study on the culture of white-collar workers in Italy (Donati and Grazioli 1992) showed that especially those workers who had reached a white-collar position coming from a working class background, perceived the 1980s as a decade of "realization of a full-fledged democratic society". And this perception was rationalized by means of continuous reference both to the sphere of the labour market and to that of consumption. In fact, both spheres had undergone an important expansion in Italy in the late 1970s to early 1980s. In the sphere of the labour market, the processes of restructuration of many large firms, brought about an explosion of personnel searches for white-collar jobs (especially for sales-related professions), which allowed many lower strata the move to a recognizable and recognized "middle-class" position. This, in turn, brought about a whole new set of classifications and categorizations of careers and professions, together with the idea of an unprecedented equalization and freedom of choice. In the sphere of consumption, even aside from the rise and equalization of living standards, the early 1980s were marked by a sudden burst of advertising and "consuming passion". Thanks to the introduction of commercial channels, in

1980, advertising investments on the TV medium, which had had a very limited increase (or no increase at all) during the previous decade, suddenly doubled and kept doubling every two years until 1984 (Masi 1989; Marletti 1993). The main consequence was that the whole population was submitted to a bombardment of messages relating the increased capacity of spending that many middle- and working-class strata had achieved during the 1970s, with a compelling illustration of the many different outlets for this spending capacity. The available quantity of goods was thus linked to the idea of choosing styles and identities, and the endless panoply of commercial ads (and of personnel advertisements) ritually confirmed that Italy had become a new society, where democracy and freedom were at last realized.

Similar conclusions concerning the political significance of consumer sovereignty and of freedom of choice may be drawn from those studies which have examined the rising role of fashion in the 1970s and 1980s (Davis 1992), or the new forms and vocabularies of advertising (Schudson 1984; Cornu 1985), as well as from the conclusions that have been drawn by students of the so-called "enterprise culture". According to Abercrombie (1991) and Schwengel (1991) for example, the shift from the authority of producers to the choice of consumers that is implicit in the so-called "post-Fordist" revolution (Piore and Sabel 1984) implies a diffusion of authority and a form of pluralism that represents a challenge to the distinction between "high" and "low" culture (see also DiMaggio 1987; Featherstone 1991) and to the legitimacy of traditional institutions. A theory of commodification - argues Abercrombie - would miss the point here, because it would see consumers as deprived of consciousness instead of seeing them as making (political) choices. The shift, thus is a process of acquisition of cultural citizenship by consumers and by middle-class people that develops in continuity from the political struggles of the 1960s, although it goes much beyond the latter. Far from bringing to political annihilation, the spread of a culture of consumption and of consumer choice and sovereignty - ultimately

based on a "grammar" of individualization - has specific and important consequences for political behavior and conflict.¹⁶

When the analysis shift from civil society to the sphere of politics, one may then see the New Social Movements as expressing the entrance into it of "consumer-culture politics", precisely as a cultural form, rather than as an aggregate on new "postmaterial" values or interests. Abercrombie and Urry (1983) have noticed that the development of the new middle-class groups has generated new forms of politics. These are represented by a fragmentation of social groups advancing claims to rights, basically generating system crises and inflation. Fragmentation,

will be a consistently significant feature of such politics. The struggles of labour are... transformed by, first, being removed from the center of the historical stage; secondly, having the service class as their apparent 'main enemy' over numbers of issues; and thirdly, through sections of that service class developing alternative political forms which 'out-radicalize' labour (feminist and ecological politics are the best example). (Abercrombie and Urry 1983:151)

Bauman (1988:ch.5) pointed out that the problem of consumer freedom is that it tends to expand to other fields of social life: the areas of production, government, community, national politics. New movements arise against all forms of bureaucratic control asking for freedom from bureaucratized and centrally controlled policy areas.

Once government provides... public goods... attention turns to more specific goods... the public is differentiated and begins to request, for example, specific kinds of educational aid... not just support for education itself. (Benjamin 1980:28)

¹⁶ It is to be noticed that my preoccupation is not with the consequences of individualization for the individual psyche. I think this aspect of the spread of consumer culture, which has been analyzed for example by Warde (1994) is not the key point. My interest is for the consequences of consumer culture for the individuals as social agents, whose behaviors and choices are (at least to some degree) socially constrained.

And of course, the public institutions and the state are ill equipped to respond to this sort of conflicts and to such a request for flexibility. For these institutions, and particularly for the welfare state apparatuses, flexibility is a critical point because the culture of services is one derived from producers' culture; ie., a culture of the production, rather than of the consumption or use of services (Keat and Abercrombie 1991). As Offe (1990) says, no conventional mode of political intervention such as legal regulation, taxation, subsidies, or even state-promulgated and subsidized education and information, can succeed in responding to problems in areas such as health practices, nutrition, gender and family relations, environmental consumption, and the ethical codes of technical, scientific, and professional groups. Offe therefore locates the main cause of these movements (and especially of the green movement) in the "poverty of public policy"; that is, in its structural inability to respond to problems of identity, shared meanings, integrity of moral life-world experiences, etc.

This offers a hint into the political role of consumption practices. A structurally informed analysis of the rise of "postmodernist" politics has been recently offered by Betz (1992). Betz argues that it is possible to examine the culture of the New Middle Class as a meaning-producing construct, rather than as made of new (postmaterialist) values. Using the German case, Betz argues that segments of the German middle class, and specifically the young "cultural specialists" have been the carriers of a postmodernist attitude confronting dominant political forms with a political stance based on a cult of individualism and subjectivity, including cynicism and escapism but also forms of pseudo-mysticism and a "new sensibility", among which especially relevant is the concern for the environment. These stances, he argues, are "promoted and sustained by the alternative culture and by segments of the Greens" (Betz 1992:107) and can be read as a conflict based on a strategy of "de-classification" (Bourdieu 1979; DiMaggio 1987; Featherstone 1991) against dominant social and political strata and "their" institutions.

Seen from this perspective, the rise of postmodernism in West Germany... lends empirical as well as theoretical support to Featherstone's attempt to interpret postmodern culture in terms of an attack by outsider intellectuals on the existing system of classification with the goal of reconstituting the symbolic order in its own favor. (Betz 1992:108)

People in this class segment score high on postmaterialist scales not because their material needs have been satisfied, but because they are trying to displace the logic of the institutionalized political game, and because they are interested not so much in consuming more of the same, but rather in consuming differently: in "de-classifying and re-classifying" consumption (and therefore social and political) practices.¹⁷ The struggle, therefore, must not be read in terms of political interests, but rather in terms of identity and legitimation of one's social and political role.

These groups are represented by those segments of the NMC active in the new movements' organizations and who share a postmaterialist value-system (see also Lash and Urry 1987). They are the carriers of a demand for political openness as the theory of the New Politics has claimed. However, while it borrows from the language of the Left-libertarian tradition, their culture is only partially one of democratization. Their stance is more populist (in the sense also in which Jameson, 1984, defines postmodernism as aesthetic populism) and aims not so much at democratizing state institutions, but rather at relocating politics within (or closer to) civil society; within (or closer to) the market and consumption practices.¹⁸

¹⁷ As Featherstone says: "The new cultural intermediaries... do not seek to promote a single lifestyle, but rather to cater for and expand the range of styles and lifestyles available to audiences and consumers." (1991:26) "The new tastemakers... encourage an inflation in cultural goods." (1991:35)

¹⁸ Despite the fact that some critics have signalled how this strategy of "de-classification and re-classification" often advances the subjective-expressive values of nature through an ideology of rigid and authoritarian "eco-scientism" (Alphandery *et al.* 1992), this stance seems to represent more of an instrumental attitude than a real goal (Biorcio 1988b).

But the logic of individualization is by no means restricted to this segment, as I already pointed out in the previous chapter. This is rather a general logic that pervades all middle class culture and it is not necessarily a progressive culture. It can as well lead to defensive stances, for example against technological and institutionalized risk (Beck 1992b). In fact, the culture of consumption and individualization pervades all middle-class strata, but not all of them belong to the groups of NMC's "cultural specialists" that are able to follow an upward social trajectory.

The second component is that of grass-roots populism. This component is also pushed by a grammar of individualization. Its segments, however, are less likely than the NMC segments to be successful in transforming their cultural capital in economic capital. They will typically embrace the politics of consumption, but they will soon find themselves trapped in their own individualistic politics. They will seek freedom from the state (for example through demands for less bureaucracy, less taxes and more privatization) and invest in consumption as a form of symbolic struggle, but at the same time they will be hit by the very specific problems that a culture of consumer choice will tend to create: physical overcrowding and symbolic loss of meaning.

One of the problems is that an accelerated rate of consumption (which is of course actively pushed by industries) tends to create problems of physical overcrowding, congestion, and coordination (Wickham 1976) that are particularly relevant as environmental problems. Yet, because Gershuny (1978:ch.3) has countered the thesis of the "social limits to growth" (Hirsch 1976) it is worth discussing it shortly here. Gershuny has argued that even if growth brings congestion from material goods this will be a net loss for rich people, but still a gain for the poor who can increase the material goods they own and command. Moreover, according to Gershuny, rather than being an inherent limit, congestion is a problem of coordination which may instead be solved practically. I tend to see this objection as valid. Congestion is likely to be

influenced, in its practical consequences, by those structures that make social coordination (and cooperation) possible. However, coordination structures tend to pose another problem: They are typical public goods, and will hardly be provided through individual action or the market. On the contrary, solving coordination problems depends on complex patterns of information exchange among the parties (Elster 1989), and it is quite likely that these will be seriously hampered by the process of individualization and de-classification as it causes a second type of problem: the loss of meaning.

In fact, both Hirsch and Gershuny fail to incorporate the symbolic value of consumption within the problem of positional goods; ie., the idea that congestion is also related to status competition. This is a problem of cooperation, rather than of coordination. Coordination would solve the problem of physical overcrowding, but not that of symbolic devalorization due to increased access to a class of goods. It is here that the core of the problem of positionality lies (Featherstone 1991). The middle class, as I said above, is typically drawn into the game of consumption as distinction, and this game implies a continuous alternance of de-classification and re-classification strategies. But the problem of drawing boundaries tends to reproduce itself precisely because it is increasingly difficult to draw such boundaries after traditional culture has been eroded. Occupational levels are divided by thin differences, and ascension and status are less and less related to "objective" merit and performance.¹⁹ This creates a situation of "loss of meaning" that makes symbolic congestion more frustrating and unsolvable than physical congestion may be. The symbols of status become

more contestable than ever before... [as] such symbolisms are perishable goods (Sulkunen 1992:19-20).

¹⁹ Notice that contrary to Bell's (1973) assumption, a system based on objective meritocracy is not consistent with the continuous delegitimation of cultural structures and boundaries.

In absence of an ability to legitimize them by connecting them to some cultural tradition, symbols become mere simulacra (Baurillard 1974, Featherstone 1991). The typical instrumentalism that derives from pervasive closure and competition means a devaluation of symbols, of myths and of culture itself as an established network of meaning: a situation of erosion of social capital.

This causes the problem, for individuals, of building identities and orientations from materials whose meanings are unstable.²⁰ Intersubjectivity becomes infected by doubt (Wernick 1991). Society faces a deficit of trust that hampers collective solutions and traps these people into a "prisoner's dilemma". Precisely where coordination would be needed, the culture of individualism and its strategies of consumption-as-closure prevent individuals and groups from solving the problems of cooperation, and leave them in a no-exit situation.

It is in this second side of the problem that anxiety is rooted. The feeling of anxiety about one's social position that middle classes experience are rooted in the fact that these segments feel at the same time free and constrained. This mechanism spurs protests that emerge when congestion and frustration reach the highest levels. Risk and accident issues are a typical case here, as accidents represent coordination failures that threaten individual freedom, property, and security. Yet, because people are enmeshed in a culture of individualism, these protests tend to draw on local-community identities and networks as a point of aggregation,²¹ and to see large public institutions and bureaucracies, as well as big firms, as the "non-cooperating" enemies and strangers.

However, these protests are not part of an identitarian quest. Rather, they will typically show a mixture of populism and a particularistic form of distrust.

²⁰ In other words, I tend to support Hirschman's thesis concerning the inherent dissatisfaction generated by consumption and possession as they are thought to alter, or conversely to fail to alter, the social hierarchy (Hirschman, 1982:ch.3).

²¹ At the same time as individualization claims autonomy from all types of established collective institutions, it cannot avoid to make collective mobilization more problematic on a wider-than-local basis, thus forcing social movement organizations to devote an increasing amount of resources to solidarity and the construction of a collective identity.

Demands will swing back and forward between the request that big bureaucracies and organizations submit themselves to the control and the will of "the (local) people", and the idea that they should help controlling the behavior of big organizations, like the firms. A typical tendency will also be that of asking for the regulation of others but not of oneself, like in waste-siting protests. Also, these protests (often local ones) are likely to emerge when material growth slows down (Brand 1990), as this creates more anxiety and suggests pessimistic attitudes concerning one's chances of success at the social game. Thus, these demands will not represent a concern for nature arising from the mystique of subjectivism and expressivism, like for NMC segments. Environmental concerns here will rather stem from more material and selfish worries with one's own status and material well-being.

In the end, as Offe states, these grass-roots movements do not carry any utopia or project for the future. Rather, they may be characterized as "Fear, pain and (physical or symbolic) destruction vs. integrity, recognition and respect" "The 'enemy' which is to be overcome is no social class or category of people, but some more abstract kind of rationality in which, at least to some extent, 'all of us' do partake or upon which we depend." (Offe 1990:234). Once again, the anxiety expressed by these forms of protests will hardly be geared towards the defense of some traditional values or culture *per se*. Most likely, it will also not be geared towards political access (namely, it will be politically noncommitted), but rather towards a generic definition of freedom from risks; which is at the same time the freedom of choice and the freedom from the constraints caused by others' behaviors. Thus, it is true that these movements mainly represent a revolt of civil society against the state, as in Habermas account. However, the contradictions from which they arise are located in civil society itself, rather than at the juncture "between system and life-world".²²

²² Thus, the fact that the state becomes the focus of new conflicts, does not mean that the state *per se* is the locus of the structural contradictions from which these conflicts arise.

9. Insecurity, reciprocal trust, and the problem of collective institutions

Part of the problem in interpreting the environmental challenge and the NSM, as I have tried to show, was derived from the failure to distinguish their different constitutive layers explaining the relationship between their structural location, their cultural orientations, and their forms of political action, therefore reconnecting them to one cultural-structural matrix. Here, I have defined a hypothesis seeing the NSM challenge as arising from the individualized logic of a consumption-oriented culture and society, and from the combination of strategies and concerns of different middle-class segments. The fact that these arise from the very same logic of individualization, but from different sides of it, explains why the two components of the environmental conflicts show frequent ambiguities in their reciprocal relationship (for example with grass-roots citizens often being distrustful of the "official" movement organizations, and with the militants of the latter being not so ready to spend their time in organizing the local protests in a more structured rank-and-file membership (Donati 1994).

My interpretation of the content of the environmental challenge, for example, is not very different from Jamison *et al.*'s (1990) definition of the environmentalist "knowledge interests". Yet, if the structural positions from which these "knowledge interests" arise are not examined, it is difficult to explain why they sometimes take the form of a positive challenge to existing institutions, and why in other cases they resemble defensive and retreatist outburst of "pessimistic communitarianism". It is for example difficult to explain why, in spite of the fact that it is the "technological knowledge interests" that represent the core of the environmentalist identity (Jamison *et al.* 1990), the

Instead, the state is one element that participates of the structural processes of production, and above all of reproduction, of contemporary Western societies in whose changing patterns the contradictions are inscribed.

main quest is addressed to political institutions, while industry is only marginally challenged in a direct way.

The environmental challenge is - perhaps more definitely so than any other issue related to the NSM - the issue of a middle-class society. But the problem cannot be defied in traditional class terms. Rather, it is one concerning the structure of culture. Here perhaps Eder (see esp. Eder 1993:ch.5) has given the best formulation of the question by saying that the environmental challenge does not represent the outcome of a class conflict; it represents the outcome of the entrance of middle-class cultural dispositions (Eder sometimes uses Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* here) in politics.

There is barely need for new empirical evidence to support the conclusion that environmental problems - as political problems - are linked to the rise of the middle classes. The cycle of the environmental challenge is consistent with the broad economic cycle that goes from the expansion of the 1960s and 1970s (with some countries like Sweden, the US and Britain coming earlier; see Edsforth 1987; Sulkunen 1992; Therborn 1995) to the social crisis and economic recession of the 1980s. The passage between the 1970s and the 1980s, which coincides with the antinuclear struggles, is thus not surprisingly a point of juncture. The 1980s have still been a period of sustained success for environmentalist instances and organizations. But the phenomenon was indeed marked by some changes. From a narrow NMC-based phenomenon, it developed into a major cultural shift, as it is witnessed by the growing worries that opinion pollsters kept registering throughout the decade, and by the local unrest of grass-roots mobilizers.

One can therefore hypothesize that while the 1970s were a phase in which the "progressive" component, based on the New left heritage of anti-bureaucratism and liberalism, prevailed, in the 1980s the "defensive" component took center stage, making the environmental challenge harsher and more visible. Thus, the so-called "New Politics" is both a consequence and a cause of the erosion of

social capital. During the 1980s, the two components mixed and interlocked, so that environmental conflicts could be read as an expression of both a democratic struggle and an anxiety-driven populism. They came to encompass both the image that postmaterialist and the New Politics theorists have given of it, and Offe's (1990), or Brand's (1990) images of environmentalism and the NSM as outcomes of a "civilization crisis", an "anti-modern-tinged" critique of technology, rationalism, bureaucracy. Here again, it may be noticed that the pattern fits perfectly the model of "cyclical modernization crises" that express *petite bourgeoisie's* anxiety toward the fall of certainties and traditional values, laid down by Brand (1990). Only, the modern environmental challenge has a quantitatively different size as, unlike in previous occurrences, the middle-class and the related consumerist phenomena have become *the* central phenomena in Western societies.

The issue of the "positional value" of goods, and of their related symbolic value, is central here. Goods have a symbolic value in all societies (Douglas and Isherwood 1979); however, in societies in which the "grammar" of individualization comes to pervade all (or most) institutions, this symbolic value also becomes an increasingly important part of the definition of (individual) needs. But this, in turn, means that the same logic through which society satisfies these needs "creates scarcity where it did not exist before." (Redclift 1990:56) It is in this sense, rather than in the sense of generic postmaterialist values, that the environment is a problem of life-style. It is a problem of life-chances defined as individualized life-chances (Kitschelt 1985).

In sum, my interpretation points to structural factors that are not, broadly speaking, economic-material factors like in Marxist theory. Nor, are they represented by the kind of "cultural values and attitudes" that traditional models (like Inglehart's) have used as explanatory variables. In my model, structural factors are meant as institutional factors in the sense that they represent internally assumed (within individual lifestyles as well as within political

institutions) constraints to (the logic of) actors' actions. In this sense, the logic of individualization that I tried to sketch above, is the institutional component which underlies both sides of the environmental challenge and their relationship to both current political-institutional and social-institutional patterns. In fact, as an institutional component, it brings environmental problems, and the ensuing environmental challenge, right back to where they belong: into the realm of questions that concern institutional forms and the provision and maintenance of social structure as a public good.

The paradox here is that underlying the environmental challenge there is not a lesser, but a greater investment in material consumption. And this is so because consumption practices depend in a substantial manner on collective institutions for their coordination (see Wickham 1976): on social quality, and therefore on "soft", non-material, aspects. Furthermore, underlying the environmental challenge there is hardly the defense of the public good but rather an attack on the public good as it had been socially conceived so far; a criticism according to which the institutions that were supposed to work for the good of all, hamper instead the achievement of individual wealth and living standards. It is because of this that the intervention of public institutions is seen as creating even more problems:

The increase in collective goods... creates a bandwagon effect. The individual citizen is driven to government, including the courts, either to counteract the local park board's new scheme to enlarge the park, which has the incidental effect of reducing his front yard, or to try to get the park board to adopt a different scheme (Benjamin 1980:28).

The "postmodernist" strategy of de-classification puts especially the Old Left under attack when the latter is unable (like in Italy for example) to abandon its orientation (especially ideological) to the traditional working-class subject, and to adopt a more modern and individualization-sensitive style (Mueller-Rommel

1990:229). Once feelings of insecurity and anxiety set in, furthermore, local mobilizers and their "NIMBY" movements inherit the generalized lack of trust in social and political institutions that had developed in the previous phase. In this sense, societies pervaded by a "grammar" of individualization have been brought about also with the active contribution of traditional leftist organizations (parties and unions) as groups which have seen in production the ultimate goal of societies and political systems, and have therefore found obvious advantages in the promotion of a society of consumers and of a culture of consumption as forms that allowed a further expansion of the productive sectors.

That "The most obvious feature of... pollution problems is that they concern issues that are public goods" (Weale 1992:5) is not a new conclusion. Indeed, the whole discussion on "the tragedy of the commons" focused since the beginning on environmental problems (Hardin 1968), and the fact that the environmental challenge centers on issues that emphasize the problem of the collective good goes much beyond the fact that the "objective" problems concern such "public goods" as air, water, etc. It also does not mean that the effects of pollution are the same for every social group or individual (Beck 1992b). Rather, the environmental challenge stems from problems concerning the collective good as a *social (and political) problem* and not only as an "objective" problem. Much beyond Daniel Bell's idea that post-industrial society would be a "communal society" in which "such public interest issues as health, education and the environment... crime, municipal services, and costs" (Bell 1973:164) rise at the center of politics. I tend to share Habermas's (1973) point that the crisis of Western capitalism lies in the inability of modern institutions to produce legitimation as a public good.

Much beyond air and water pollution, the environmental challenge stems from issues that are directly related to problems of cooperation and coordination, like sewage, traffic, waste, but also from issues that are indirectly related to such problems, like the issues of risk and technology as issues that derive from

political choices concerning types of production technologies, and are also choices about the physical distribution of goods and bads (Beck 1992a; 1992b).²³

In this sense, environmental problems seem to epitomize the full range of issues that characterize "post-industrial" societies as societies in which a "grammar" of individualization becomes the central life-form. In a sense, it is possible to say, also, that environmentalism becomes a metaphor of the need to care for the collective good as the basic institutions and trust that should govern social life in a society of individuals. Now, it is true that periods of declassification and deconstruction of social ties and boundaries are cyclical and that sooner or later new patterns become institutionalized. Yet, in our times the spread of individualization seems to be unprecedented. If this is the case, as Ostrom (1990) shows, no centralized authority or intervention will offer a viable solution. The challenge is rather that of reconstructing a culture of trust that would not deny the value of an individualized life form, and it is at the same time able to assume the existence of the collective good as a potential problem.

²³ The problem of risk is indeed that of establishing legitimate social priorities rather than a problem of avoiding risks (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982).

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